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SUBJECT: INDIAN TIGERS RETURN TO SARISKA AMIDST CONTROVERSY

REF A: 05 New Delhi 4673

REF B: 07 New Delhi 5322

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1. (U) SUMMARY: As of July 2008, Sariska Tiger Reserve, the only designated tiger reserve in India to lose its entire population of tigers to poachers (Ref A), once again has wild tigers roaming its environs. In an unprecedented and well coordinated operation initiated by the Rajasthan Forest Department involving the National Tiger Conservation Authority of the Ministry of Environment and Forests, senior scientists and veterinarians from the Wildlife Institute of India, the Indian Air Force, and the NGOs Wildlife Protection Society of India (WPSI) and WWF-India, two tigers were relocated from Ranthambore National Park to Sariska via Indian Air Force helicopter - despite controversy over the timing and lack of reforms in the tigers' new home. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) The first tiger to make the 30 minute flight was a young male followed six days later by a young female. After spending a few days in a heavily guarded one hectare enclosure, both tigers have now been released into the wild. The tigers are fitted with a combination satellite/radio collar and both have made kills on their own. Emboffs discussed the operation with the major players involved and learned that while the controversial relocation itself was a success, very few of the problems that lead to the original tigers demise have been resolved.

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TIGER AS POLITICAL PAWN  
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3. (U) The plan to relocate tigers from Ranthambore to Sariska had been discussed in governmental and NGO circles for over two years with leading conservationists expressing strong reservations against the relocation until the existing problems in Sariska had been resolved. Sariska has two major State highways passing through it, a temple that receives over 200,000 pilgrims each year, and three villages located inside the reserve. All of these factors negatively impact the tigers' habitat and to date, none of them have been resolved. (NOTE: A fourth village was moved outside the park prior to the reintroduction. END NOTE) In addition, Sariska has marble and dolomite mines surrounding it, many of which operate illegally, as well as a strong mining lobby which has been pushing to de-notify the park as a tiger reserve in order to open it up to legal mining operations.

4. (SBU) Belinda Wright, the high-profile Executive Director of WPSI, had long been opposed to relocating tigers to Sariska until the problems had been resolved but recently changed her position and came out publicly in favor of the relocation. In a conversation

with EmbOffs, Ms. Wright, who was present at Ranthambore when the tigers were airlifted to Sariska and who played a role in the selection of which tigers to relocate, stated that after speaking to park officials, she was convinced that the time was "politically" right to move ahead with the relocation. She said that the loss of tigers in Sariska was a tremendous loss of face for the Rajasthan government led by BJP Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje and that the tigers had to be reintroduced before upcoming elections in November. Ms. Wright said she was convinced that if tigers were not relocated to Sariska during Raje's tenure, political will for the relocation would evaporate.

15. (U) Ms. Wright acknowledged that Sariska continues to face the same problems that existed earlier and stated it was unlikely that the highways would get rerouted or the temple closed. She did note one village had been relocated and efforts are underway to relocate the other three villages. Her main point however was the fact that tigers existed in Sariska even with the temple and highways and that they had been wiped out by poaching which was allowed to occur due to apathy on the part of park officials who did not provide adequate protection or monitoring. Apathy, she continued, was no longer a problem at Sariska and noted that careers were on the line with the reintroduction. She concluded by stating that park officials "will be finished if it does not succeed."

16. (SBU) EmbOffs also met with WWF-India Secretary General Ravi Singh who was present in Sariska and met the helicopter when the first tiger was relocated. When pressed regarding the timing of the relocations, he stated that pressure from the mining lobby against the reintroduction had been mounting and that if the relocation had not taken place when it did, the park would be taken over by the mining mafia. Ms. Wright had also addressed the mining issue and stated the lobby had paid a local politician to stir up anti-tiger sentiments in the villages around the park. Mr. Singh went on to say that any relocation is fraught with risk and that there will

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never be a perfect time for reintroduction. He said "one just has to take the leap" and that the presence of tigers will give the necessary impetus to resolve the longstanding issues in Sariska.

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THE FUTURE OF TIGERS IN SARISKA  
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17. (U) The two tigers reintroduced into Sariska are currently well protected. Ex-paramilitary forces are deployed in the park along with regular forest guards, and patrolling has increased. In addition, the satellite collars allow for daily, although not continuous, tracking of the tigers depending on satellite coverage over the park. EmbOffs also received conflicting reports of the presence of 250 armed Rajasthani constabulary protecting the two tigers. In a telephone conversation with EmbOffs, the Rajasthan Forest Department's Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Mr. R.N. Mehrotra, was upbeat about the safety of the tigers and hoped they would soon mate. He also said he had been deluged with requests from around the world to view the tigers but was maintaining a moratorium on tourists until October 1, 2008. In addition, Mr. Mehrotra confirmed plans to relocate three more tigers to Sariska from Ranthambore, two females and a male, within the next year. He concluded the conversation by once again thanking EmbOffs for the Embassy's November 2007 Wildlife Crime Workshop in which Embassy funds supported the training of both Ranthambore and Sariska forest guards (Ref B). He also stated the Rajasthan Forest Department welcomed further U.S. collaboration on tiger and other wildlife conservation issues and would be willing to consider any conservation proposals the U.S. may have.

18. (SBU) Ravi Singh however was a bit more skeptical regarding the future stating the female tiger had had trouble adjusting to its new environs; an observation shared by Belinda Wright who noted the tigress had shown signs of restlessness, and while in its enclosure had not made any attempts to kill prey. This behavior contrasts with that of the male tiger which quickly adapted to its new home. However, Mr. Mehrotra stated officials tracking the tigers after their release from the enclosure confirmed that both had made kills

and that the male was exploring territory. Mr. Singh expressed reservations whether the tigers will breed this year, mainly due to the age of the female tiger which, in his opinion, was too young. This sentiment was not shared by Ms. Wright or Mr. Mehrotra.

¶9. (U) Conservationists agree that no conservation or relocation plan can be successful without the support of the local communities and villagers in and around Sariska have had mixed opinions. A villager living near Sariska told Ms. Wright she was happy to see tigers come back as criminal elements had increased since Sariska's tigers disappeared. A villager living inside the park told Ravi Singh she welcomed the tigers return as they helped to thin out weak and diseased cattle in her family's herds. However, many villagers have not been wholly welcoming of the new tigers or the reforms needed to protect them. Media reports indicate villagers have been protesting the idea of banning heavy vehicles on the state highways in the park and are completely unwilling to use a longer diversion road for the sake of the tiger. They also will not tolerate any regulation of pilgrim traffic to the park's temple. In addition, there is concern the mining lobby will once again support poaching.

¶10. (SBU) COMMENT: While it was clear to EmbOffs that the relocation was a well planned and executed operation, there is no doubt the parties concerned, both governmental and non-governmental, were not wholly confident of success. Despite the fact this relocation was unprecedented, of worldwide interest, and highly dramatic - the male tiger woke up in flight and the helicopter sank into the mud in Sariska when it landed, no film crews were allowed during the operation and no films of any kind were made. In addition, Rajasthan is using these two tigers in the same role as a staked goat hoping the tigers presence will force the reforms needed to protect them. Although Rajasthan and the NGOs have made great strides in tiger conservation in Ranthambore, which now has more tigers than its carrying capacity, they have put the cart before the horse in Sariska and if they fail, it will not only mean the end of government careers as Ms. Wright stated, but NGO reputations as well.

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